



**STUDENT PROFILE:**  
**KELLY BUCKSHIRE (D'18)**  
**REBECCA IVINS (D'18)**  
**MAYA THOMPSON (D'18)**  
**POOJA GARG (D'18)**

## Collaborating to Discover How to Reduce Oral Health Disparities

*Four Master of Public Health Students Team with Alumna on Research Serving the LGBTQ Community*

During a lecture on social justice and health equity for the public health course last year at Penn Dental Medicine, alumna Dr. Kari Hexem (D'15, MPH) was excited to share her passion for her work at Philadelphia FIGHT Community Health Center, a comprehensive health services organization that provides primary care, dental care, consumer education, research, and advocacy for people living with and at high risk of HIV/AIDS. She was equally pleased that her words sparked a collaborative research effort among four predoctoral students in the audience.

Those students — Pooja Garg (D'18), Rebecca Ivins (D'18), Kelly Buckshire (D'18), and Maya Thompson (D'18) — are pursuing dual degrees at Penn Dental Medicine: a Master of Public Health (MPH) along with their DMD. As part of their MPH coursework, the four devised a qualitative research study to better understand how to reduce oral health disparities in sexual and gender minority individuals.

“One of my responsibilities at Penn Dental is to help public health dual-degree students come up with research projects,” says Dr. Hexem, who is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Preventive & Restorative Sciences in the Division of Community Oral Health at Penn Dental Medicine. “As the director of Dental Services at Philadelphia FIGHT, it was exciting to see their interests meld with my own.”

### UNDERSTANDING PATIENT NEED

Under the collaborative mentorship of Dr. Hexem and Dr. Rosemary Frasso, PhD, MSc, CPH, at Penn’s Center of Public Health Initiatives, the student researchers collected data about the lived experiences of sexual and gender minorities seeking care at Philadelphia FIGHT Dental Services, which provides comprehensive dental care to Philadelphia FIGHT Health Center patients and other community members.

“We all have a deep desire to truly understand patient need and to apply that

understanding in our practice,” says Garg. “Being able to talk to Philadelphia FIGHT patients allowed us all to better understand the gap in dental care that exists for sexual and gender minorities.”

That health disparity is an important one to tackle. Because of a lack of access to care as well as other social determinants of health, many people who identify as LGBTQ have difficulty accessing the dental exams and treatment they require. This gap in care is especially concerning because oral health is indicative of overall health and poor oral health can impact other medical problems, including heart disease.

Now that in-depth interviews with Philadelphia FIGHT dental patients are complete, the students are examining the data and intend to share that insight to help FIGHT provide enhanced care to its patients and add to the knowledge about conducting culturally sensitive research. One early indicator already has

significant promise for enhancing oral health across demographics.

“We noticed a distinct timeline in almost all interviewees’ stories,” explains Ivins. “Those we interviewed recounted early exposure to dental care as kids, then a discontinuation of that care in early adulthood and not seeking care again until they were in pain. Identifying this temporal pattern has allowed us to see the value in developing oral health interventions for emerging adults.”

They also learned the importance of compassionate, culturally sensitive care. “I was impressed with how confident the Philadelphia FIGHT dental patients were in talking about their conditions and in understanding the importance of taking responsibility for their health,” says Thompson. “That was definitely a result of a solid relationship between the patients and the FIGHT care providers.”

### SEEING THE BENEFITS OF INTERPROFESSIONAL HEALTH CARE

The student researchers were also able to observe the benefits of how locating dental services in a primary health care setting can improve access to dental care, particularly for vulnerable populations. Philadelphia FIGHT has been offering dental services since 2015, when Dr. Hexem joined the agency as dental director. Dental care is provided in tandem with other services, including behavioral health, HIV primary medical care, HIV testing, and counseling.

“We were able to see firsthand that dentistry does not exist in a vacuum,” says Garg. “If you are going to be a health care provider, you must appreciate the wider scope of patient need.”

This qualitative research project has given the students the opportunity to apply research to solve a problem in a real-world setting. Once the research is complete, Dr. Hexem believes it will have an impact on advancing oral health initiatives for the LGBTQ community.

“There is very little evidence-based information available regarding what we as dental professionals can do to be more welcoming to the LGBTQ community or even how to conduct culturally sensitive research in the LGBTQ community,” she says. “These students are paving the way for future researchers to develop targeted interventions that could improve the oral health of LGBTQ members in our society.”

## Department of Endodontics Building Research, Innovation Funds

Penn Dental Medicine’s Department of Endodontics is undertaking two initiatives to build on its rich history of leadership in the field of endodontics — The Jutta Dorscher-Kim Research Fund and the Penn Endo Clinic Innovation Fund.

“Since Penn Dental Medicine alumnus and professor Dr. Louis I. Grossman (D’23, HON’78) paved the way for the birth of the specialty, endodontics at Penn has devoted itself to staying at the forefront of the field,” says Dr. Bekir Karabucak (GD’97, D’02), Chair of the Department of Endodontics. “Now 70 years after the first class of students graduated under Dr. Grossman, these two new funds will help build vital support as we continue to move our programs forward.”

At a special reception, held April 27, 2017 at the Association of Endodontics (AAE) annual meeting in New Orleans, hundreds of Penn Dental Medicine endodontics alumni and friends came together to celebrate the accomplishments of the long line of distinguished alumni and faculty and to highlight the goals of these funding initiatives.



In honor of Mrs. Kim’s lasting contribution to the Department, The Jutta Dorscher-Kim Research Fund has been established to support resident and faculty research and professional engagement, with the long-term goal of also creating a fellowship for a master’s degree candidate. Mrs. Kim was an integral part

of the Department of Endodontics for many years. A skilled editor, she helped faculty and residents compose research abstracts and manuscripts for scientific journals and AAE meetings and was instrumental in the Department’s success in book and scientific paper publications. She also organized the Department’s international program, which continues to bring practitioners from around the world to the School each year for training in advanced endodontic techniques and technologies.

The Penn Endo Clinic Innovation Fund will raise resources for equipment, technology, and training, ensuring that the School’s state-of-the-art Syngcuk Kim Endodontic Clinic remains outfitted with the most advanced surgical microscopes and related technologies and continues to support and advance the Department’s leadership in the integration of the operating microscope into endodontic education and practice.

For more information on these funds, contact Maren Gaughan, Associate Dean for Leadership Giving, [gaughan@upenn.edu](mailto:gaughan@upenn.edu), 215-898-8952.